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SUBJECT: OMAN REACTS TO NEW UAE BORDER SECURITY POLICY AT
AL-BURAIMI OASIS

Classified By: Ambassador Gary A. Grappo for Reasons 1.4 (b, d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) A decision by the UAE in September to immediately implement border crossing controls at the Al-Buraimi oasis has disrupted the lives of residents and the flow of commerce in the conjoined cities of Al-Ain (UAE) and Al-Buraimi (Oman). Upset at the apparent absence of consultation on the change in policy, Oman announced a month later that the city of Al-Buraimi would be the capital of a new Omani governorate. The situation at the oasis was likely raised during a surprise visit to Muscat on November 8 by two senior Emirati officials. End Summary.

SPLIT AT THE SEAM

2. (U) The Omani city of Al-Buraimi shares an expansive desert oasis with the much larger city of Al-Ain, located within the Abu Dhabi emirate in the UAE. The two municipalities, though located in different countries, are only a stone's throw from each other and have long been closely linked by tribal and economic ties. Even after the demarcation of the Abu Dhabi-Oman border in 1966, the adjoining cities continued to function as one metropolitan area with people and goods freely crossing the border. Persons traveling between Al-Buraimi and other points in Oman pass through a customs and passport control point further inside Oman so as to facilitate the flow of vehicular and pedestrian traffic between the two oasis cities. In recent years, the population and economic development of Al-Ain has greatly exceeded that of its Omani sister city. Some of this growth, however, has spilled over the border as individuals and families, particularly expatriates who work or study in Al-Ain, are drawn by lower rents to reside in Al-Buraimi.

3. (U) UAE officials, reportedly concerned about the entry of economic migrants and contraband items into the Abu Dhabi emirate from Al-Buraimi, began building a talQfence separating Al-Ain and Al-Buraimi more than five years ago. Despite the presence of this fence, vehicles and persons continued to move unhindered along the main roads connecting the two cities. Earlier this year, however, area residents noticed the construction of what appeared to be checkpoint buildings on the UAE side of the border and an increasing Emirati police presence that occasionally stopped cars driving into Al-Ain from Oman. This gradual change to the status quo culminated in a sudden and unexpected change in UAE border policy, implemented on September 17, that required all non-GCC citizens wishing to enter Al-Ain from Al-Buraimi to possess a UAE visa and to cross at a checkpoint well outside the center of town. (Note: Citizens of the six GCC countries presenting valid identity cards are allowed to enter Al-Ain without a visa and may use a border crossing point near the city center. End Note.)

14. (SBU) Emboffs have heard several accounts of how the new border procedures have seriously disrupted the lives of area residents, especially non-GCC expatriates. As the policy change was apparently implemented with almost no notice and somewhat haphazardly in mid-day, several people complained about not being able to cross the border to pick up their children from school in Al-Ain after dropping them off in the morning, or not being able to return to their offices in Al-Ain after having a long lunch in Al-Buraimi. Western expatriates report that business owners on both sides of the border - but particularly in Al-Buraimi - have complained of supply problems and of losing customers as people choose to shop, dine and play closer to their homes to avoid hassles and delays at the checkpoints (and for some, to save the cost of buying an Emirati entry visa). One expatriate teacher working in Al-Ain, but living in Al-Buraimi, griped that the shift in UAE border policy was a "plot" to benefit landlords in Al-Ain by forcing people in her situation to move from their less expensive residences in Oman.

FROM DISTRICT TO GOVERNORATE

15. (SBU) On October 16, a Royal Decree was issued by the Sultan establishing a new Al-Buraimi governorate comprising the "wilayats" (districts) of Al-Buraimi, Mahdah and Al-Sinainah. This governorate, only the fourth in the country, is much smaller than the other governorates in both geographic size and - with well less than 100,000 residents - population. Major Omani newspapers on October 30 reported on a large "celebratory march" in the city of Al-Buraimi the previous day and displayed front-page pictures of participants holding large signs with pictures of the Sultan. According to the press articles, the marchers wished to

MUSCAT 00001595 002 OF 002

express thanks for the creation of the new governorate - wQh carries with it a bigger budget and the promise of more development projects - and to show their allegiance to the "Architect of Oman's blessed renaissance" (i.e. the Sultan).

A SURPRISE VISIT

16. (SBU) On November 8, media outlets unexpectedly reported that Shaikh Muhammad bin Zayed, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces, and Shaikh Hamdan bin Zayed, Deputy Prime Minister and President of the UAE Council of Ministers, had arrived in Muscat leading a small official delegation. The Emirati VIPs were welcomed at the royal pavilion at the airport by the Minister of Diwan of the Royal Court and departed the country a few hours later after meeting with the Sultan and senior Omani officials. In an indication of the sensitive nature of the meeting, no one from the Omani Ministry of Foreign Affairs was reportedly involved in the visit, and the press was even more vague than usual on the content of the talks.

TYING THE PIECES TOGETHER

17. (C) The unexpected Emirati decision to unilaterally change the border crossing regime at Al-Ain was most likely very upsetting to Omani officials. In addition to feeling slighted by not being consulted, the palace and Omani government may be concerned that residents of the area, and particularly indigenous tribal members with a long tradition of free movement, will now be forced to "choose sides" and decide in which town -- Al-Ain or Al-Buraimi -- they will pray at mosque, send their children to school, etc. The fact that the new UAE policy may hurt businesses in Al-Buraimi could also stoke under-the-surface discontent by some Omanis there who look over the border with envy at the relatively greater wealth and level of development in Al-Ain. According to the popular Omani internet chatroom al-Sablah, an

increasing number of Omanis in Al-Buraimi and neighboring towns may be seeking UAE citizenship. Posts on al-Sablah also speculate that the change in UAE policy reflects a relatively new anti-Oman bias among the Emirati leadership, which was supposedly evidenced previously by the "demotion" in 2004 of pro-Omani Shaikh Sultan bin Zayed from Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces to the largely honorary post of Deputy Prime Minister.

18. (C) Since the size and population of the Al-Buraimi area in Oman does not, from a non-political perspective, seem to justify its recent designation as a new governorate, it is likely that the decision was made to send a message to UAE officials and/or to mollify disgruntled Omanis resident there. The Deputy Commander of the Royal Oman Police, Maj. General Mohammed al-Riyami, confirmed to the Ambassador recently that the change in UAE border procedures had already had a considerable impact on Omani residents of the area, which was likely to lead to a reevaluation by Oman of its own policies and procedures at the popular border town. However, while hinting at official Omani displeasure with events at Al-Ain, he said that Oman would not assign additional officers to the border area near Al-Buraimi despite UAE security concerns. Post has not obtained a readout of the surprise visit of the two senior Emirati shaikhs, but it is very likely that the subject of Al-Ain/Al-Buraimi was raised in addition to probable discussions on Iran and other major security issues.

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